DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 360 878 FL 021 470

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TITLE Reconstruction of Academic Credentials for Southeast Asian Refugee Teachers: A Comprehensive IHE Approach to Access and Excellence.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 8p.; In: Malave, Lilliam M., Ed. Annual Conference Journal. Proceedings of the National Association for Bilingual Education Conferences (Tucson, AZ, 1990; Washington, DC, 1991). Washington, DC, 1993, p191-196; see FL 021 457.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Asian Americans; Bachelors Degrees; College Admission; *Credentials; Elementary Secondary Education; *English (Second Language); Higher Education; Liberal Arts; *Professional Continuing Education; Program Descriptions; *Refugees; Second Language Instruction; *Teacher Certification; Teacher Education; *Teacher Qualifications
IDENTIFIERS *Southeast Asians; University of Massachusetts Lowell

ABSTRACT

The University of Massachusetts-Lowell's efforts to help Southeast Asian refugees reconstruct their academic credentials for teaching and further higher education are described. The program evolved in response to refugee frustration at difficulty in establishing existing teaching credentials and obtaining admission to higher education institutions, and also to the shortage of trained and qualified bilingual teachers in the immediate area of the university. Several initiatives are involved, including: (1) establishment of an academic credential validation committee, with native speakers and specialists in Southeast Asian higher education systems as members; (2) an assessment center to give advice, orientation, and referrals to teachers and individuals wanting to continue their academic and professional development; (3) an evening bachelor's degree program designed for this population; (4) an in-service education program for Southeast Asian teachers and paraprofessionals; and (5) an English language program to prepare teachers for the English language proficiency examination required for certification. (MSE)

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Reconstruction of Academic Credentials for Southeast Asian Refugee Teachers: A Comprehensive IHE Approach to Access and Excellence

Juan C. Rodriguez

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RECONSTRUCTION OF ACADEMIC CREDENTIALS FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEE TEACHERS: A COMPREHENSIVE IHE APPROACH TO ACCESS AND EXCELLENCE

Juan C. Rodríguez

Abstract

Many Southeast Asian refugees who were qualified professional educators in their native country are working in menial jobs because they lack official proof of academic credentials needed to become certified teachers, or to gain admission into institutions of higher education (IHE) degree programs. On the other hand, the unprecedented number of Southeast Asian refugee students moving into the city school systems intensifies the shortage of qualified bilingual teachers, as is the case of Lowell, Massachusetts.

This paper reports the comprehensive effort of an IHE to remedy the frustrating experience of Southeast Asian refugee teachers through a unique program of reconstructing their academic credentials. It also describes the University of Massachusetts-Lowell's Assessment Center, Bachelor of Liberal Arts program, the English Language Proficiency, and the Pedagogical Development projects, all designed to assist the Southeast Asian teachers to gain professional competencies.

This innovative educational response was possible because of the collaborative efforts of local school systems, the University's College of Education, and state and federal agencies.

Chea Prum teaches Southeast Asian students in Room 201 at the Main Street Elementary School. Because of the students' limited English proficiency, second graders are learning social studies, math and other subjects in their native Khmer language.

Mr. Prum, a former teacher in Cambodia, found a teaching job in the Lowell School System after searching for nine years. He is also currently a participant in the teacher training program at the College of Education. He is luckier than most Southeast Asians who cannot become certified because they left their papers behind when they fled their countries. However, the influx of limited English proficiency (LEP) students who speak Khmer, Lao or Vietnamese, have prompted a great demand now in many urban areas for teachers like Mr. Prum.

In Massachusetts, during the 1989 fiscal year, fourteen percent of the students enrolled Southeast Asians, for a total of 4,728 youngsters. They were served by 28 bilingual certified teachers and 111 teachers under waiver from the Massachusetts Department of Eduction. If the increment of Southeast Asians is compared with the rest of the LEP students between fiscal year 1987 and 1989 it can be noticed that, while the total enrollment increased by 28.56%, the Southeast Asian student population grew by 36.41%.

The arrival of Southeast Asians in Massachusetts began in 1979 and it concentrated in Lowell, a New England mill town located 30 miles from Boston, and which is rooted in the industrial revolution of the 19th century. The

Southeast Asian population in Lowell is made up of a very large group of Cambodian/Khmer refugees (whose number increased five fold since 1984) as well as Laotians and Vietnamese.

In the city of Lowell, which is second only to Long Beach, California in Cambodian population in the U.S., the situation becomes more compelling if the unprecedented number of Southeast Asian students moving into the school district is considered. The 1984 enrollment of Southeast Asian LEP students in the city of Lowell was 494, representing 4.1% of the total population. By the end of the 1987-1988 school year, the number of these students augmented to 2,674 or 20.7%.

A significant number of these children did not have previous school experience because of the turmoil in their native country. Others interrupted their schooling due to their relocation in refugee camps and their ultimate resettlement in this country. Because of their refugee status, most Southeast Asians lack educational credentials, including school records, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to assess their academic background. All of these factors in addition to their experience of war, their exodus from their native land, their adaptation to a new way of life and a foreign language in America, and the destruction of their families are situations which most people would find very hard to overcome.

The lack of official credentials to document their academic background, which is required for teacher certification in Massachusetts, is a towering obstacle for many Southeast Asian refugees who were qualified professionals in their native country. Many of them are here working in menial jobs, while others work as teachers' aides or tutors.

This situation presented a new challenge to the University of Massachusetts-Lowell and compelled its College of Education to assume a social and educational role of service to the Southeast Asian community. If the preparation of school personnel under regular circumstances is important, this unique situation required an urgent response. It was necessary to take an innovative approach that resulted, after much efforts and frustration, in the reconstruction of the academic background of many uncertified Southeast Asian refugee teachers.

This paper will report on the attempt to establish a unique program to address the needs of uncertified Southeast Asian refugee teachers, a program that helped Mr. Prum and others like him get back into the classroom.

The Educational Response

In order to improve the instructional and professional competence of Southeast Asian bilingual teachers and paraprofessionals to effectively teach LEP students in the American educational system, the College of Education's Bilingual Program implemented several initiatives. The collaborative action of schools, the College, state and federal agencies is one of the most important features of the Southeast Asian Program. Some of the components of the program follow:

Reconstruction of Academic Credentials:

Because of their refugee status, most of the target teachers were unable to obtain official transcripts of their educational background from their native country. This lack of documentation made it nearly impossible for them to obtain their teacher certification. Individuals willing to further their education at colleges and universities also confront the problem of admission or proper placement based on their professional background.

To explore the possibility of solving this situation, a nationwide survey was conducted by the Bilingual Program at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell to identify organizations that deal with the reconstruction of academic credentials, but none were found who address this problem. Several organizations do evaluations and translations, but not even one does reconstruction of academic credentials.

Therefore, the University of Lowell sought the cooperation of several state institutions dealing with education and Southeast Asian refugee issues. After two years of much negotiation, the Massachusetts Department of Education with the cooperation of the College of Education established a procedure to reconstruct previous academic background of bilingual Southeast Asian refugee teachers who were seeking teacher certification and academic degree. For this purpose the Academic Credential Validation Committee was created. This Committee is made up of groups of native speakers of the language and recognized experts of the Cambodian, Laotian or Vietnamese higher educational system.

The identification of these well respected individuals, who have extensive academic and professional experience was possible after an exhaustive national search. Many members of the Committee held academic rank and were educational administrative authorities in their native countries. To complete an evaluation of a candidate's educational level, the Committee conducted a review of whatever documentation the candidate could provide, and followed with an extensive interview to ascertain the candidate's academic background in his or her native country and elsewhere.

The innovative process of reconstructing academic credentials, a service offered free of charge, is making the documentation of the educational background of many Southeast Asian teachers possible. This documentation may then be utilized for teacher certification and to continue studies in institutions of higher education to obtain degrees. Up to the present time seventeen undocumented educators have received a certificate equivalent to a Bachelor's degree. Other applicants, approximately eighty, have received the equivalent of ninety to thirty academic credit hours.

The reconstruction of academic credentials is helping to ease the shortage of qualified bilingual teachers to work with Cambodian and other Southeast Asian children in Massachusetts, and is serving as a model to other states which are experiencing a similar problem. To provide feedback, guidance and to oversee the operation of the academic reconstruction process, an advisory committee has been established. Members are deans of education from independent and public IHEs concerned with refugee educational issues, and state officers of the Massachusetts Department of Education and the Office of Refugee and Immigrants.

Assessment Center:

To fill the gap that existed in terms of advice, orientation and referral of teachers and individuals interested in continuing their professional and academic development, or those in need of teacher certification, the Assessment Center was established in 1987. The Center reviews credentials, academic and/or professional experience, and provides information, advice, guidance and referral to Southeast Asians regarding requirements and procedures for becoming a teacher and to obtain certification. In addition the Center, whose service is free of charge, assists prospective teachers on issues related to professional development and employment.

Bachelor of Liberal Arts:

The College of Education, working with the College of Liberal Arts and the Division of Continuing Education at the University of Lowell, has initiated a program to assist undergraduate level Southeast Asian bilingual teachers to complete the required courses needed for a Bachelor of Liberal Arts degree. This undergraduate program, which differs from the Bachelor of Arts day program, is designed for individuals who went through the academic reconstruction process or teachers who are currently working under waiver in school systems. Classes are held in the evenings and the staff is familiar with the problems that this kind of population is confronting. The program of study is offered by the College of Liberal Arts.

Pedagogical Development:

In order to assist in the development of the professional competencies of Southeast Asian teachers and paraprofessionals presently working in the school systems in the Merrimack Valley, an in-service program has been implemented. This program has as a framework in the ethnographic tradition. It focuses it's training activities on the priorities identified by the local schools in areas such as educational methods and techniques, classroom management, bilingual education and second language acquisition, language arts, curriculum, etc. (Impink-Hernández, 1989; Minaya-Rowe, 1990; Faltis, 1991). These tuition-free courses were designed to improve the effectiveness and quality of instruction and are offered for academic credit during the fall and spring semesters, and early in the summer. Presently, approximately 35 Southeast Asian teachers and 25 paraprofessionals are participating in this in-service professional development program.

English Language Proficiency:

Part of the program also prepares Southeast Asian teachers to take the Language Proficiency Examination in English required for teacher certification by the Massachusetts Department of Education. The preparation courses offered focus on the two components of the language proficiency exam: the linguistic and cultural components. The improvement of English language skills, in order

to effectively conduct classroom instruction and school activities, was a priority identified by the teachers participating in the professional development program.

A Look Beyond the Program

Programs for the training of educational personnel in Bilingual Education have been in place for many years; a large number of them focus on the Hispanic population. Recently with the influx of Southeast Asians, it became urgent to establish professional education programs for this population to seriously meet their specific needs. Usually, training programs address a singular aspect, such as in-service, certification, degree, etc.; only rarely do they consider a comprehensive professional development program, and almost none are tailored for Southeast Asians whose refugee status makes their needs quite different from other emerging ethnic groups.

The unique educational alternative promoted and offered by the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, gives access to Southeast Asian teachers and provides them opportunity to regain their previous teacher status. It allows individuals like Mr. Prum to further their education and to become duly certified educators in their adopted land. Ultimately and most importantly, it effectively meets the educational needs of the Southeast Asian children, whom these educators are being trained to serve. In addition, the Bachelor of Liberal Arts and the English language proficiency examination preparation courses assist Southeast Asian teachers in their empowerment process (Cummins, 1989) and professional growth. " My students are learning better and I am more confident about my teaching. Without the Bilingual Program I would still be struggling out there," said Mr. Prum.

A side benefit of implementing the educational program for the Southeast Asians was to heighten the presence of the University's College of Education community, and to provide a gratifying opportunity to reactivate old collaborative networks or establish new ones among local, state and federal agencies.

To prepare exemplary and effective bilingual teachers to work with culturally diverse students is a complex endeavor, but it is hoped that in the future other IHEs can continue and improve the prototype developed in Massachusetts. The challenge to design new educational approaches to meet the needs of other communities similar to the Southeast Asian throughout the nation still remains.

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